Middle School Journal

Middle School Journal

ISSN: 0094-0771 (Print) 2327-6223 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/umsj20

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**To cite this article:** Paul S. George (2010) Renewing the Middle School: The Lesson of Hansel and Gretel for Middle Schools, Middle School Journal, 41:3, 49-51, DOI: 10.1080/00940771.2010.11461721

**To link to this article:** http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2010.11461721

Published online: 26 Aug 2015.

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Special Series: Part 3

# Renewing the Middle School: The Lesson of Hansel and Gretel for Middle Schools

Paul S. George

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**Editor's note:** *Renewing the Middle School is a special three-part series in which Paul George, an eminent scholar in the field of middle grades education, offers his view on the current status of middle grades education and its prospects for the future. In the final installment of the series, Dr. George draws wisdom from the story of Hansel and Gretel to recommend a path forward and to call us all to action in the critical work of educating every young adolescent.*

I believe that middle school educators can learn an important lesson about survival during difficult times from the classic German fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel, two young adolescents who faced great difficulty. Fairy tales like this one have been popular with generation after generation of children and families because they deal with hopes and fears that every child and every adult deals with, regardless of time or place.

Hansel and Gretel are the children of a kind and loving woodcutter, living in a forest home with a hateful and selfish stepmother during very difficult times. Things get so bad, with starvation a real possibility, that the hateful stepmother finally persuades Hansel and Gretel's father to do the unthinkable and abandon the children in the woods. So, one night the heartbroken father leads his children deep into the woods and abandons them there. Unbeknownst to the father and stepmother, however, Hansel overhears them planning and gathers up a pocketful of bright, white stones that, reflecting the moonlight, will lead them back home even in the dark of night. And they do find their way back home.

It is not long, however, before the selfish and hateful stepmother convinces their father to once again lead them even deeper into the dark forest and abandon them there. Without the shiny white pebbles to guide them, Hansel is left to gather some bread crumbs that he sprinkles along the trail, hoping that they will be able to find them and come home. As we know, however, this does not happen. The birds and creatures of the woods eat the bread crumbs, leaving Hansel and Gretel lost in the deep, dark, and dangerous woods. The story continues by describing an encounter with a terribly wicked witch.

I think that the power of this fairy tale lies in its essence as a metaphor for the predicament that all of us occasionally find ourselves in: lost in the dark woods and needing to find our way home. The important lesson for middle school educators and researchers, I think, comes

**This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics:** Shared Vision — Committed Leaders — Courageous & Collaborative Leaders

> **We need to acknowledge the dedication and the commitment of those who keep pursuing their dreams for young adolescents.**

from understanding the two different ways in which Hansel tried to find his way home after being abandoned. One way was to create a path of durable, shiny pebbles that almost glowed in the dark, and the other way was to lay a trail of bread crumbs that were quickly consumed by the animals and left the children lost and alone. We can choose either the shiny pebbles that we can see even in the dark woods, or we can rely on bread crumbs that may seem to work but, ultimately, leave us lost and alone. To find our way home, we need to know the difference between bread crumbs and white, shiny pebbles. What are the pebbles that will lead us out of the dark and dangerous woods? What are the pebbles that can light our way? Which is the pathway home? Here are some of the pebbles I believe need to be in the pockets of middle grades educators—pebbles that will still be there when the moon shines.

- Our historic commitment to a developmentally appropriate education for young adolescents.
- A common curriculum that grows from the needs and interests of students and their teachers that is guided by standards, not strangled by them.
- Meaningful, close, and long-term relationships between and among students and their teachers, understanding that teacher-student alignment should have as high a priority as curriculum alignment.
- Strong support for the arrangements that encourage strong student-teacher relationships: interdisciplinary teaming, advisory groups, flexible scheduling, active learning, and other strategies for making big schools feel smaller and more effective.
- The power of trust among educators as a core requirement for continuous school improvement.
- Infusing each of these values into the operation of every middle grades program: freedom, democracy, empowerment, equity, optimism, teamwork, shared decision making, parental involvement, local control, celebration of diversity, management of complexity and ambiguity, tolerance, and humane and reasonable assessment strategies.

These six shining pebbles—permanent, trustworthy guides to home and safety in the education of young adolescents—light a path to the middle school paradigm.

In the modern middle school movement, we can identify people like John Lounsbury, James Beane, William Alexander, and dozens of others who have believed and acted on the assumption that human beings are basically good and, given a proper education and appropriate developmental experiences—given a real chance to do the right thing—can grow up to become adults who are wise and good, loving and kind. We believe that real opportunity for this kind of an education is the birthright of every American child. We dream of the day when every child has access to that experience, when every child is given the pebbles that will help them find their way. These are the shining stones that will guide us home. Benjamin Mays, former president of Morehouse College in Atlanta, summed up our circumstances more lyrically, perhaps, than the tale of Hansel and Gretel:

> It must be borne in mind that the tragedy of life doesn't lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It isn't a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream. It is not a disaster to be unable to capture your ideal, but it is a disaster to have no ideal to capture. It is not a disgrace not to reach the stars, but it is a disgrace to have no stars to reach for. Not failure, but low aim, is sin.

Educators of young adolescents in the U.S. and throughout the world have never aimed low. Our aim has always been to provide authentic educational success with *every* child. Every child, not just some children. Every child, not just those with influential parents. Every child, not just those with powerful advocates. Every child, not just those with the right clothes, right skin color, right last name, or the right language. Every child, including those whose hair is dirty and matted. Every child, including those whose clothes are torn and smelly. Every child, including those whose parents never come to school. Every child, including those who move three or four times a year. Every child, including those who

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are silent and those who shout. Every child, even when we are criticized for what we do and blamed for all the shortcomings of schools.

Idealistic as this may sound, our profession has always been driven by aims and dreams like these. We do need to help weak schools get stronger; we do need to promote high standards for all; and we do need to demand the very best from all educators. But we also need to celebrate even small gains made against long odds. We need to acknowledge the dedication and the commitment of those who keep pursuing their dreams for young adolescents. Most important, we all need to keep our eyes fixed on the shining stones that will lead us safely home.

**Extensions**

The author identifies six values, beliefs, and practices that "light a path to the middle school paradigm." Use these as a framework for team or school-wide strategic planning and goal setting, or use them to guide individual reflection and goal setting.

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